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Donald J. Treffinger

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Myth 5: Creativity Is Too Difficult to Measure

Donald J. Treffinger

Center for Creative Learning, Inc.

In his 1982 response to this myth, Dr. Joe Khatena (a long-time contributor to the literature on creativity), characterized creativity as the “most exciting dimension of mental functioning.” Building on a three-dimensional view of creativity (emphasizing the *individual*, the *environment*, and the *cosmos* or “suprarational” dimensions), Khatena described a hierarchy of creative levels from the fundamental, rational to the highest or most esoteric levels of creative genius (in Torrance’s phrase the “further reaches” of creativity). Arguing cogently for the importance of clarity about one’s conception of creativity, he proposed that, although the highest levels yet eluded assessment, it was certainly a myth that the more fundamental, rational dimensions were unable to be measured. He pointed to a number of scientific efforts to assess creativity (such as the contributions of Torrance and Guilford, for example) in which it was clearly demonstrated that valid and reliable measurement of rational dimensions of creativity is possible.

As we review progress since Khatena’s response, the myth still persists, and his conclusion that some relevant dimensions of creativity can be measured remains valid. In several ways, however, the nature and expressions of the myth have changed, and several closely related myths have also emerged.

Inquiries about finding and selecting tests of creativity for use in gifted programs continue to be among the most common questions we receive. Typically, especially in relation to “identification” of students, the form of these questions is “we need a test of creativity.” When probed, the common specifications include the requirement that the test (a) yields “hard” data, and preferably a single score or index; (b) is brief and easy to administer and score (preferably objectively); (c) has extensive norms for classifying the students from “gifted” to “average” (or below); (d) is appropriate across ages, genders, and social or cultural differences; and, of course, (e) is cost efficient (or even free).

We know that an honest, thorough response to these questions will not begin with what the questioners wish to hear. Rather, it is necessary to begin by asking about their fundamental conception or definition of creativity (wondering quietly what definition of this complex construct would possibly make those specifications meaningful!), and about their purpose for seeking a creativity measure. What does “creativity” mean as they use the term? Does it refer to artistic ability, to a set of cognitive skills, or to inventiveness or imagination? Are they seeking to select students on the basis of creative ability, or to determine how best to nurture creativity among various students? Usually, the responses to these questions are vague or even absent; it seems to come as a surprise that how one measures a construct might be influenced by the meaning one assigns to that construct and by the ways you hope to be able to apply or use the data you gather. At worst, the conversation ends at that point; at best, it typically drives our discussion back to a much more fundamental set of issues.

When we can attain a clear and constructive grasp of the basic issues of definition and purposes, we can begin to move forward, but we have overcome only the first hurdle in dispelling the myth. Other pitfalls still confront us, which are the offspring of the “creativity is too difficult to measure” myth.

There really aren’t any good tests of creativity. Of course, the “goodness” of a test may be a question of technical adequacy, but it also relates in important ways to the issue of what expectations you hold about what the test measures, and also to what you hope to do with the instrument (or how you hope to use the results it yields). If one begins with the expectation of

Author’s Note: Please address correspondence to Donald J. Treffinger, President, Center for Creative Learning, Inc., 4921 Ringwood Meadow, Sarasota, FL 34235; e-mail: don@creative-learning.com.

finding a single instrument that will measure a person's absolute aptitude or potential for creativity (across any and all expressions or manifestations of creativity, in any setting, and for any age subjects), the problem is not in the tests, but in the expectations. Given that creativity can be expressed and applied in virtually an infinite numbers of ways, and that it may evolve and change across time and contexts, it is simply unrealistic to expect a single, all-purpose instrument to exist. If, instead, one begins with a more carefully constructed and delimited set of expectations, the technical issues are much more readily addressed (e.g., Treffinger, Young, Selby, & Shepardson, 2002; Kaufman, Plucker, & Baer, 2008; Puccio & Murdock, 2006). Far from having no instruments from which to choose, there is actually a broad array. We maintain an informational database, for example, of more than 60 resources (see <http://www.creativelearning.com/Assess/index.htm>). They differ substantially in their technical adequacy depending on the age group, specific variables you are seeking to assess, the extent to which you seek to engage in individual assessment or group comparison, and the extent to which your goals involve evaluation (e.g., assessing program effectiveness or impact), instructional diagnostics (planning for appropriate instruction), or individual assessment (e.g., clinical or counseling applications).

We need to have a score to categorize or label highly creative students. Often, the pressures that lead educators in gifted programs to seek a "silver bullet" to categorize students as "gifted or not gifted" (see Myth 3) carry over into the quest for a creativity test. The questioner seeks a test to use to label an individual student as "creatively gifted" or to distinguish highly creative students from their presumably less creative peers. However, an alternative view begins with the credible belief that all people have the potential for creativity. Rather than separating a single, predetermined set of "highly creative" individuals, this leads us to approach our challenge as designing effective and appropriate programming to recognize and nurture students' creative strengths and talents (e.g., Treffinger et al., 2002; Treffinger, Young, Nassab, & Wittig, 2004; Treffinger, Young, Nassab, Selby, & Wittig, 2008). Given this commitment, the most effective uses of creativity tests are to provide data that will enable educators to provide appropriate and challenging educational experiences whether the student's creativity is not yet evident, emerging, expressing, or excelling. That is, the data we gather about the

student's creativity should guide educators in designing and differentiating instruction, rather than simply including or excluding students from programs (Treffinger, 2003).

But is this student really creative or not? There has long been a search for the defining characteristics of "the creative person" and an instrument that would identify those traits. Spanning more than four decades, innumerable lists and checklists have been promulgated; our tally of the characteristics presumed to indicate creativity now exceeds 300. We have learned that there is not just one way for a person to "be creative," or one set of characteristics that will differentiate "the" creative person; rather than asking, "how creative are you?" it has become evident that a more powerful question is "how are you creative?" (e.g., Treffinger, Selby, & Isaksen, 2008). Research informs us that individuals vary, not only in relation to level of creativity, but in relation to style of creativity as well (e.g., Selby, Treffinger, Isaksen, & Lauer, 2004) and that effective assessment of creativity involves a profile of characteristics, skills, and motivations (Houtz & Krug, 1995; Isaksen, Puccio, & Treffinger, 1993; Treffinger et al., 2002).

Is creativity "too difficult" to measure? Let us acknowledge Khatena's wise conclusion in 1982 that "the measurement of creativity, like other facets of intellectual functioning, will always be a challenge," and hold in mind the caution that any complex form of behavior should never be presumed to be "easy" to assess. Nonetheless, if we establish the goal of gathering data to understand the richness and breadth of creativity, in an appropriate context and for appropriate purposes, assessing creativity is a possible and worthwhile undertaking.

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Donald J. Treffinger, PhD, a researcher, writer, teacher, and presenter in the area of creativity and creative problem solving, problem-solving style, and gifted and talented education, is President of the Center for Creative Learning in Sarasota, Florida. He holds MS and PhD degrees in educational psychology from Cornell University. He has taught at the elementary and middle-school levels, as well as at Purdue University, the University of Kansas, and Buffalo State College. He is the author or coauthor of more than 400 books, monographs, and journal articles. He received the National Association for Gifted Children's Distinguished Service Award and the E. Paul Torrance Creativity Award. In 2005, he received the Risorgimento Award from Destination ImagiNation, Inc., and the International Creativity Award from the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children. He served as Editor of the *Gifted Child Quarterly* from 1980 to 1984, as Editor-in-Chief of *Parenting for High Potential* from 2000 to 2007, and is a member of the *Gifted Child Quarterly* Editorial Advisory Board.